AUGUSTE
VILLIERS DE L'ISLE-ADAM

AKEDYSSERIL

Translated from the French

by

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in collaboration with

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FIRST ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Akedysseril

by Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam

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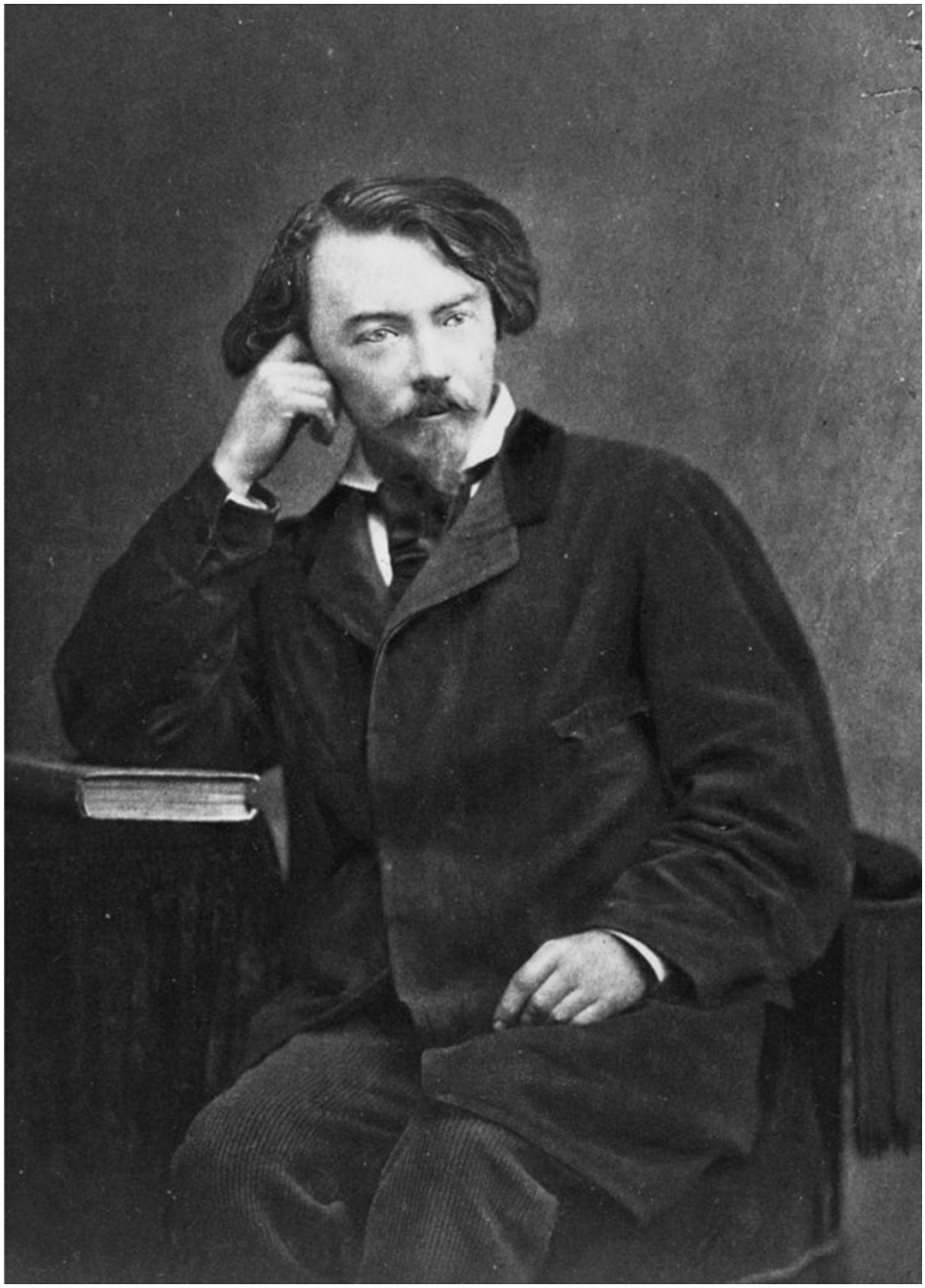
AKEDYSSERIL



Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam in 1886

AKEDYSSERIL

Every thing is made of nothing but its own void.

HINDU BOOKS.

THE HOLY CITY appeared, violet, far within the golden mists: it was an evening of the olden ages: the death of the orb Surya, phoenix of the world, was wringing myriads of gems from the domes of Benares.

On the heights of the western east, long forests of palmyra-palms stirred the gilded blueness of their shade over the valleys of Habad; and on their farther slopes, amid the flames of the twilight, mystic palaces alternated with tracts of roses, whose corollas undulated by thousands under the stifling breeze. There, in those gardens,

fountains leapt upward, and their jets fell back in drops of a snow the colour of fire.

In the midst of the suburb of Secrole, the temple of Vishnu the Eternal overlooked the city with its colossal colonnades. Its portals, broadly plated with gold, refracted the radiance of the air; and, set at intervals about it, the hundred and ninety-six sanctuaries of the Devas plunged the whiteness of their marble bases, and laved the steps of their forecourts, in the sparkling waters of the Ganges: the open fretwork of their battlements pierced upward into the purple of the slow, passing clouds.

The radiant water slept beneath the sacred quays; here and there, far out, sails hung with shiverings of light over the magnificence of the river; and the vast city unrolled itself along the banks in an Oriental disorder, terracing its avenues, multiplying its numberless white-domed houses and its monuments, as far as the quarters of the Parsees, where the pyramidion of the lingam of Siva, the ardent Wissikhor, seemed to burn in the conflagration of the azure.

In the remotest distances, the circular avenue of the Wells, the interminable quarters of the soldiery, the

bazaars of the Exchange, and, last of all, the towers of the citadels built in the reign of Viswamitra, melted into tints of opal so pure that the glimmer of stars already trembled in them. And, overhanging in the very heavens those confines of the horizon, measureless figures of divine beings, carved upon the rocky crests of the mountains of Habad, sat enthroned, spreading their knees across the immensity. They were summits hewn into the shape of gods; most of those silhouettes lifted into the abyss, at the end of a dizzying arm, a lotus of stone; and the stillness of those presences made space uneasy, and life afraid.

Meanwhile, as that day declined, a murmur of glory and festival astonished the wonted silence of nightfall in Benares. The multitude filled with a grave gladness the streets, the public places, the avenues, the crossways and the sandy slopes of either shore; for the watchmen of the Holy Towers had just smitten with their bronze mallets the gongs in which, of a sudden, the thunder had seemed to sing. That signal, which sounded only at sublime hours, announced the return of Akedysseril: of the young victress over the two kings of Agra, the slender widow with the pearly skin and the brilliant eyes; of the sover-

eign, in fine, who, wearing her mourning in a robe of woven gold, had made herself illustrious at the storming of Elephanta by deeds of heroism that had kindled a thousand courages about her.

AKEDYSSERIL WAS the daughter of a herdsman, Gwalior. One day, deep in a vale near Benares, on an autumn noon, the propitious Devas had led, through a train of chances, to the brink of a spring where the young maiden was bathing her feet, a hunter of the aurochs: Sinjab, the royal heir, son of Seur the Clement, who then reigned over the vast country of Habad. And in that very instant the charm of the predestined child had wakened in the whole being of the young prince a love divine! To see her yet again soon fired Sinjab's senses so violently that, with a dazzled heart, he chose her for his only wife; and thus it was that the child of a herdsman had become a shepherd of peoples.

Now, mark: a little while after that marvellous union, the prince, whom she too had loved for ever, was dead. And despair had cast upon the old monarch so deep that

shadow of which men die, that all in Benares heard, twice over, the baying of the funeral hounds of Yama, the god who calls; and the peoples had been forced to raise, in haste, a double tomb.

Henceforth, was it not to Sinjab's young brother, to Sedjnour, a prince still almost a child, that the dynastic succession to the throne of Seur, under the august guardianship of Akedysseril, was to pass?

Perhaps: no one among mortals will ever mark the bounds of justice in any right whatever.

During the swift days of her rising fortune (while Sinjab yet lived, that is to say), the daughter of Gwalior, already stirred by secret forebodings, her heart tormented by the future, had borne herself as a brilliant scoffer at every right save those alone which strength, courage and love consecrate. Ah! how well she had known, by politic largesses of dignities and of gold, how to create for herself, at the court of Seur, in the army, in the capital, in the council of the viziers, in the State, in the provinces, among the chiefs of the Brahmins, a party whose power time had consolidated from hour to hour!... Uneasy now about the morrows of a new accession whose very nature

was unknown to her (for Seur had desired that Sedjnour's youth should be schooled far away, among the sages of Nepal), Akedysseril, as soon as the council had ordered the young prince's recall, resolved to free herself beforehand from whatever adversities the caprice of the new master might hold in store for her. She conceived the design of seizing the royal power, in disdain of all debatable duties.

On the night of the sovereign mourning, therefore, she who did not sleep had sent out to meet Sedjnour detachments of sowars, well proved by interest and by faith in their devotion to her cause, to herself, and to the extremities of her fortune. The prince was suddenly made captive with his escort, and with him the daughter of the king of Sogdiana, the Princess Yelka, his love and his betrothed, who had hastened, slenderly attended, to meet him.

And it was at the very moment when the two beheld each other for the first time, upon the road, under the radiance of the night.

From that hour, prisoners of Akedysseril, the two young creatures had lived cast down from the throne,

kept apart in two palaces divided by the wide Ganges, and watched without respite by a stern guard.

This double seclusion had its reason of State: should one of them contrive to escape, the other would remain as hostage. And, fulfilling the law of predestination promised to the betrothed in ancient India, though they had seen each other but once, each had become the other's thought, and they loved with an eternal ardour.

NEARLY A year of reign confirmed the power in the hands of her who now ruled; and she, faithful to the melancholies of her widowhood, and ambitious only, perhaps, to die illustrious, beautiful and all-powerful, treated with the Hindu kings as an adventurous conqueror, and threatened them! Had not her lucid mind contrived to increase the prosperity of her States? The Devas favoured the fortune of her arms. The whole region admired her, submitting with love to the magic in the gaze of this warrior woman: a gaze so delicious that death at her hands was a favour she did not lavish.

And then a legend of glory had spread abroad touching her strange valour in battle. Often the Hindu legions had seen her, in the thick of the fiercest fray, rise up, all radiant and fearless, flowered with drops of blood, upon the jewel-laden howdah of her war-elephant, and, heedless under the rain of javelins and arrows, point the way to victory with a haughty flash of her scimitar.

That was why the return of Akedysseril to her capital, after a warring exile of several moons, was greeted by the transports of her people.

Couriers had forewarned the city when the queen was no more than a very few hours distant. Now the scouts in red turbans could already be made out afar, and troops shod with iron were coming down the hills. The queen would come, no doubt, by the Surat road; she would enter by the chief gate of the citadels, leaving her armies to encamp in the villages round about.

Already, in Benares, at the far end of the avenue of the Pyram-vada, torches were running under the terebinths; the royal slaves were hastily lighting the immense palace of Seur with lamps.

The people gathered triumphal branches, and the women strewed broad flowers along the avenue of the palace, which crossed the avenue of the Rishis and opened upon the square of Kama. At frequent intervals the crowds stooped low, listening to the ground quiver beneath the onset of the war-chariots, of the marching foot, and of the floods of cavalry.

Suddenly there was heard the muffled rumble of tymbals, mingled with a clashing of arms and chains, and, broken by the sonorous shocks of the cymbals, the droning melodies of brazen flutes. And lo, on every side, cohorts of the vanguard were entering the city, ensigns aloft, carrying out in disorder the commands bellowed by their sowars.

On the square of Kama, the esplanade of the Surat gate was covered with those tawny carpets of Irmensul, and of the distant looms of Ipsamboul: fabrics of faded motley, brought by the yearly caravans of Turanian merchants, who bartered them for eunuchs.

Between the boughs of the areca-palms, the palmyras, the mangroves and the sycamores, along the avenue of the Ganges, rich stuffs of Bagdad floated in token of hap-

piness. Beneath the canopies of the Western gate, at either angle of the enormous porch of the fortress, a dazzling train of courtiers in long embroidered robes, of Brahmins and of officers of the palace stood waiting about the vizier-governor, beside whom were seated the three vizier-Guicowars of Habad. There would be rejoicings; the spoils of Elephanta would be shared out among the people, and gold-dust too; and, above all, there would be given, in the vast enclosure of the circus and by the light of a single torch, one of those night combats of rhinoceroses which the Hindus idolised. The inhabitants feared only lest wounds should have marred the beauty of the queen; they questioned the panting scouts, and were not easily reassured.

In a space left clear, between tall, heavy tripods of bronze from which bluish vapours of incense escaped, theories of bayaderes in shining gauzes twined and writhed in garlands. They played with chains of pearls, made the curves of daggers glitter, feigned the movements of voluptuousness, and quarrels too, to lend animation to their features; this was at the entrance of the avenue of the Rishis, on the way to the palace. At the

other end of the square of Kama, in silence, opened the longest avenue of all. That one, for centuries, men had turned their eyes from. It stretched away deserted, darkening along its deep, forsaken course the vaults of its black foliage. Before its entrance a long line of psylli, girt with greyish loin-cloths, set serpents dancing upright on the tips of their tails to the sound of a shrill music.

It was the avenue that led to the temple of Siva. No Hindu would have ventured beneath the thickness of its horrible leafage. Children were schooled never to speak of it, not even in a whisper. And, as joy that day lay heavy upon every heart, no one paid any heed to the avenue: one would have said it was not there, rounding its gaping darkness, with its look of a dream. According to an old tradition, on certain nights a drop of blood oozed from every leaf, and this shower of red tears fell sadly upon the earth, soaking the soil of the dismal alley, whose whole length was steeped in the very shadow of Siva.

All eyes questioned the horizon. Would she come before the night rose? And it was an impatience at once hushed and joyful. Meanwhile the twilight was turning to

azure, the golden flames were going out, and in the pallor of the sky, already, stars…

At the moment when the divine globe hung trembling at the edge of space, ready to founder, long streams of fire ran rippling over the western vapours; and in that same instant, out of the defiles of the far hills between which the Surat road ran level, there appeared, amid the sparkle of thick dust, clouds of horsemen, then thousands of lances, then chariots; and on every side, crowning the heights, there rose up the fronts of phalanxes in sun-browned caftans and tawny sandals, with knee-pieces of brass from whose centres jutted deadly spikes: a bristling of pikes whose points were nearly all thrust into severed heads, so that these, at the hazard of every step, knocked together in savage kisses. Then, escorting the rolling gear of the siege-engines and the numberless hurdles drawn by sturdy onagers, on which the wounded lay upon litters of leaves, came more troops of foot, with javelins or the great sling at their girdles; and last of all, the provision-wagons. This was nearly the whole vanguard. They came hastening down the paths of the slopes towards the city, and entered it all round, by every gate. A little after, the

blasts of the royal trumpets, still unseen, answered from afar the sacred gongs that were growling over Benares.

Soon officers came galloping as messengers, clearing the road and shouting divers orders, followed by a rolling of heavy sledges that overflowed with trophies, opulent spoils, riches, plunder; and these came between two hosts of captives, who trudged with bowed heads and shook their chains, and before whom rode, on their massive spotted horses, the two kings of Agra. These the queen was bringing back in triumph to her capital, albeit with great honours.

Behind them came war-chariots with radiant fronts, mounted by young girls in vermilion armour, some of them bleeding from wounds ill bound with swathes, each with a great bow slung crosswise at her shoulders, crossed with sheaves of arrows: these were the warlike handmaidens of their terrible mistress.

Last of all, dominating this glittering disorder, in the centre of a half-orb formed by sixty-three battle-elephants laden with sowars and chosen warriors, and followed on every side, far off, by the immense vision of

enveloping armies, appeared the black elephant of Akedysseril, with its gilded tusks.

At that sight the whole city, hitherto mute, and seized at once with pride and dread, breathed out its convulsive rapture in a thundering acclamation; thousands of palms rose waving; it was an enthusiastic fury of joy.

Already, in the high glow of the air, one could make out the form of the queen of Habad, who, standing between the four lances of her canopy, stood out mystically, white in her robe of gold, against the disc of the sun. At her slender waist could be seen the starry belt to which her scimitar was clasped. With the fingers of her left hand she herself guided the little chain of her formidable beast. After the example of the Devas carved far off upon the summits of the mountains of Habad, she lifted in her right hand the sceptral flower of India, a golden lotus wet with a dew of rubies.

The evening that lit her empurpled the grandiose train about her. Between the legs of the elephants hung, distinct against the clear red of space, the tips of the trunks; and higher, at the sides, the vast ears, starting and flapping like the leaves of palms. The sky flung reddening

gleams, in flashes, upon the points of the ivories, upon the precious stones of the turbans, upon the iron of the axes.

And the ground resounded dully beneath their approach.

And ever, between the steps of those colossi whose dreadful half-circle masked the distance, a monstrous black cloud, moving, seemed to rise on every side at once, orbicular, and by degrees, from the rim of the horizon: it was the army surging up behind them, far away, ranging its mighty lines in tiers, broken by a thousand dromedaries. The city took comfort in the thought that camps had been made ready in the neighbouring townships.

When the queen of Habad was no more than a bowshot from the Gate of the North, the processions went out along the road to greet her.

And soon all recognised the sublime face of Akedysseril.

This snowy daughter of the solar race was tall of stature. The mauve purple of a fillet faded in battles, interwoven with long diamonds and set at intervals with tall points of gold, circled the pallor of her brow. Her hair,

floating down her lithe and muscular back, mingled its bluish shadows with the ribbons of her diadem upon the golden tissue of her robe. Her features had a charm so oppressive that it inspired, at first, disquiet rather than love. Yet countless youths in Habad pined in silence for having seen her.

A glow of pale amber, diffused through her flesh, quickened the contours of her body, like those transparencies with which the dawn, hidden behind the Himalayan peaks, pervades their whiteness as if from within. Beneath the level stillness of her long eyebrows, two dark blue lights in the languid lids of a Hindu woman, two magnificent eyes laden with dreams, shed about her a transfiguring magic upon all things of earth and heaven. They steeped in unknown enchantments the fatal strangeness of that face, whose beauty, once seen, was never forgotten.

And the jut of the haughty temples, the subtle oval of the cheeks, the cruel, fine-cut nostrils that quivered in the wind of danger, the mouth touched with a gleam of blood, the chin of a taciturn despoiler, the smile, ever grave, in which a panther's teeth shone: all these together, thus

veiled in sombre distances, became the most magnetic of seductions once one had undergone the radiance of her starry eyes.

An inaccessible enigma lay hidden in her grace of a peri.

Playing with her warrior maidens of an evening, under the tent or in the gardens of her palaces, if one of them, with some charming word, marvelled at the infinite desires that the heroic mistress of Habad raised in her path, Akedysseril would laugh her mysterious laugh.

Oh! to possess, to drink like a sacred wine the barbaric and delicious melancholies of this woman, the golden sound of her laughter; to bite, to press ideally upon that mouth the dreams of that heart, in kisses shared! to clasp without a word the fluid and undulating fullness of that enchanted body, to breathe its suave hardness, to lose oneself in it, and in the abyss of her eyes above all!... Thoughts fit to break the senses, mirroring a giddiness that her august widow's eyes, in their despairing chastity, would never mirror back. Her being, from which this desolating certainty went forth, inspired the young fighters of her legions, in the height of assaults and the shock of

armies, with a thirst for wounds received there, beneath her eyes.

And then, from the whole flowering chalice of her bosom, from all her person, there breathed a subtle, unhoped-for fragrance! Intoxicating, and such… that, in the heat of battle above all, a charm went torturing all about her, goading her frantic defenders to an unbridled longing to perish in her shadow: a sacrifice she would sometimes encourage with a superhuman look, so delirious that she seemed to give herself in it.

Those were memories, in the radiant mist of her victories, known to her alone, which came back to her in her sleep.

Such appeared Akedysseril, now, at the entrance of the citadel. For a moment she listened, perhaps, to the words of welcome and love with which the lords saluted her; then, at an imperceptible sign, the chariots of her warrior maidens swept through the vaults with a crash of thunder and spread out, radiating, across the square of Kama. The joyful clamours of her people were calling her: driving her black elephant, therefore, beneath the porch

of Surat and over the spread carpets, the sovereign of Habad entered Benares.

Suddenly her eyes fell upon the ill-famed avenue, at the end of which, far off, there stood out the ancient, enormous, squat front of the temple of Siva.

Starting, at some memory no doubt, she halted her beast and flung an order to her mahouts, who let down the steps of the howdah along the animal's flanks.

She came down lightly. And behold, like beings conjured up by her desire, three phaodjs in black turbans and black tunics, sure and cunning informers, charged, beyond a doubt! with some most secret mission during her absence, sprang up as though out of the earth before her.

At a wish of her eyes, all drew back.

Then the phaodjs, bending about her, whispered one after another, long, long, very low words that none could hear, but whose effect upon the queen seemed so terrible, and grew so as she listened, that her paling face was lit of a sudden by a dreadful, menacing glare.

She turned away; then, in an abrupt voice that rang through the silence of the hushed square:

“A chariot!” she cried.

Her nearest favourite leapt to the ground and offered her the two reins of silk braided with threads of brass.

Springing into the vacant place:

“Let no one follow me!” she added.

And with fixed eyes she gazed down the deserted avenue. Heedless of the stupor of her people, and of the shudder into which she threw the astounded city, Akedysseril, urging her horses to a fire of sparks, overturning the terrified psylli, crushing serpents under the gleam of her wheels, plunged all alone, a luminous arrow, beneath the black shades of Siva, which drew out the horror of their solitude as far as the fatal temple.

Soon she was seen to dwindle in the distance, to become a brightness, then something like the twinkling of a star…

At last all caught a confused glimpse of her when, having reached the northern clearing, she drew rein before the basalt steps beyond which, on the height, stretched the forecourts of the sanctuary and its deep colonnades.

Gathering up with one hand the fold of her golden robe, she was now mounting, far away, the dreaded steps.

Come to the portal, she smote its bronze leaves with the pommel of her scimitar, three blows so terrible that the reverberation, like a sonorous moan, reached, faint with distance, as far as the square of Kama.

At the third summons the mysterious doors opened without a sound.

Akedysseril, like a vision, went forward into the interior of the building.

When her form had disappeared, the high metal jaws, which had gaped wide at her summons, closed their dark yawn upon her, pushed by the unseen arms of the sains, the servitors of the dwelling of the god.

The daughter of Gwalior, disdaining any backward look, ventured down the long vistas of the baleful halls formed by the spaces between the pillars; and the chill of the stones multiplied the ringing of her steps.

The last reflections of the sun's death, coming through loopholes pierced on the western side only, in the thickest of the high walls, lit her solitary progress. Her vibrant eyes sounded the twilight of the enclosure. Her war-buskins, still bloody from the last fray (but that could not displease the god she was braving), rang in the silence.

Reddish gleams, falling slantwise from the loopholes, lengthened the shadows of the gods across the flagstones. She walked upon those moving shadows, brushing them with her golden robe.

At the far end, upon heaped blocks of red porphyry, there rose a formidable vision of stone, the colour of night.

The colossus, seated, spread itself wide between its parted legs, figuring an aspect of Siva, the primordial enemy of Universal Existence. Such were its proportions that only the torso could be seen. The inconceivable face was lost in the night of the vaults, as it is lost to thought. The divine statue crossed its eight arms upon its funereal breast; and its knees, reaching across space, touched the walls of the sanctuary on either side.

Upon a rise of three steps, vast purple hangings fell, suspended between pillars. They concealed a central cavity hollowed out in the monstrous plinth of the Siva.

There, behind the impenetrable folds, sloping towards the porticoes, lay the Stone of Immolation.

Since the dim ages of India, at the approach of every midnight, the Sivaite Brahmins, at the growl of a sum-

moning gong, poured forth from their underground retreats, dragging into the sanctuary a human being, who had sometimes come running to offer himself, carried away by disdain of life. By the circling glow of the altar's embers alone (for no lamp burned in the dwelling of Siva), the priests stretched upon the Stone this naked victim, held fast at the four limbs by fetters of brass.

Soon the torches of the sains flared up, lighting the hushed ring of Brahmins. At a sign from the High Pontiff, the Sacrificer of Siva came forward, pausing at each step… then, stooping slowly towards the Stone, with a single stroke of his broad blade he silently opened the breast of the holocaust.

Then, leaving the altar, in blind devotion to the destroying godhead, the High Pontiff drew near, cursing the heavens. And, plunging his taloned hands into the gash, which he widened by main force, he first searched its horror. Then he drew out his arms and raised them as high as he could, offering to the divine Reproduction the heart, torn out at hazard, whose bleeding fibres slipped between his fingers, held apart according to the sacerdotal rites.

The monotonous mutter of the Brahmins, as an ecstasy invaded them, rattled out around him the ancient hymn of Siva (the great Imprecation against Light), known to them alone. When the chant ceased, the Pontiff let his quivering oblation drop upon the holy fire, which consumed its last palpitations; and the warm steam thus rose, an expiation of life, along the appeased belly of the god.

This ceremony, always secret, was so brief that the echoes of the temple never rang with more than a single great cry.

That evening, upon the triple step beyond which the Stone of sacrifice lay thus deeply veiled, there stood the only visible dweller in the solitudes of the temple; and the look of that man was as chilling as the look of his god.

The gigantic nakedness of this old man, his loins girt with a black rag, his fleshless frame floating in a whitish skin of rustling wrinkles as though it had become a stranger to him, stood out against the blood-red of the heavy draperies.

The impassivity of that face, with its mighty skull, naked, defenceless and bald, upon whose receding temple

there lay at that instant the fire of a spot of sunlight, struck one with giddiness. In the hollows of the orbits, beneath their bared arches, watched two fulgurant lights that seemed able to discern only the Invisible.

Between those eyes an ample eagle's beak plunged down upon a mouth like some old wound grown white for want of blood, which closed mystically the squareness of the chin. A will alone burned in that emaciation, which death could no longer appreciably change; for all that Man calls Life, save motion, seemed destroyed in this spectral ascetic.

This living dead man, several centuries old, was the High Pontiff of Siva, the priest of the frightful hands, the Anchorite whose very name was forgotten by himself, and whose syllables no mortal could have recovered, doubtless, save by listening intently, at night, in the deserts, to the cry of the tiger. Now it was to him that Akedysseril was coming in her wrath; it was this very man whose aspect transported her with a fury betrayed by the heaving of her bosom, the flaring of her nostrils, the quivering of her lips!

Come at last before him, the queen halted and considered him an instant without a word; then, in a voice that rang firm, young and vibrant through the terrifying loneliness of the measureless tomb:

“Brahmin, I know that you have freed yourself from our joys, our desires and our griefs, and that your gaze has grown heavy as the centuries. You walk wrapped in the mists of a divine legend. A herdsman, merchants of Kordofan, hunters of the lynx and the wild ox, have seen you by night on the mountain paths, plunging your brow into the vast glare of the storm; and, all lit with lightnings whose burning virtue was blunted upon you, deaf to the crash of the heavens, you calmly refracted in the depth of your eyes the vision of the god you bear within. In contempt of the elements of our abysses, you were casting yourself in spirit towards the sacred Naught of your ancient hope.

“How, then, am I to threaten you, inaccessible shape? My executioners would spend their ancient science in vain upon your living carcass, and my fairest virgins their enchantments! Your insensibility makes my power of no effect. I will therefore lay my complaint before your god.”

She set her foot upon the first flagstone of the sanctuary; then, lifting her eyes to the great face of shadow lost in the high darkness of the temple:

“Siva!” she cried, “God whose invisible flight clothes the very light of the sun with terror; God who stood up before the Unrevealed, reproving and condemning this lie of the universes… which you shall one day destroy! If ever in battle I have felt your exterminating presence about me, you will hear, O Father of fatal Wisdom, a daughter of a day who dares to trouble the silence of your dwelling, that she may denounce to you your priest.

“Remember, since it is the attribute of the Gods to take so strange an interest in the complaints of men! Few dawns had shone upon my reign, Siva, when, compelled to cross the Jaxartes and the Oxus with my armies, I had to enter as a conqueror the burning cities of Sogdiana, whose king was demanding back his only daughter, Yelka, my prisoner. I knew that certain peoples of Nepal would seize the occasion of that distant war to proclaim as king of Habad one… whom I could not bring myself to put to death: Sedjnour, in short, their prince, the brother, alas! of Sinjab, my unforgotten husband. If I was a con-

queror, was not Sedjnour sprung from the race of Ebbahar, the most ancient of kings?

“I conquered in Sogdiana! And on my return I had to subdue the rebels, who have since proclaimed me valiant and magnanimous in lasting inscriptions.

“It was then that, to forestall fresh seditions and other wars, the Council of my viziers of State, in Benares, decreed the destruction of the very cause of these troubles, in the name of the common safety. A sentence of death was therefore passed upon Sedjnour, and upon his betrothed, my captive still; and India adjured me to hasten its execution, that the stability of my throne and of peace might at last be assured.

“In that strait, my quivering pride refused to lessen itself by braving the remorse of such a crime. That they were my captives was an inevitable iniquity which I allowed myself, with sorrow, O God of despairing meditations!... But that they should become my victims: the cowardice of an ungrateful heart, whose mere memory would have blighted for ever all the pride of my being! And then, O God of victories! I am not cruel, like the daughters of the rich Parsees, whose ennui delights in

watching death; the great daring women, well proved in battle, are made of clemency; and, like one of my sisters in glory, Siva, I was reared by doves.

“And yet the existence of those children was a constant peril. I had to choose between their death and all the generous blood that their cause would doubtless yet have shed!

“Had I the right, I, a queen, to let them live?

“Ah! I resolved at least to see them once with my own eyes, to judge whether they were worthy of the anxiety that tormented my soul. One day, at the first rays of dawn, I put on the garments of former days, when I kept my father Gwalior’s herds in our valleys; and I ventured, an unknown woman, into their dwellings, lost among the fields of roses on the opposite banks of the Ganges.

“O Siva! I came back dazzled, at evening!... And when I found myself alone once more in that hall of the palace of Seur in which I became a widow, and in which I remain one, a melancholy of living overwhelmed me: I felt more troubled than I should have believed possible!

“O pure pair of charming beings, who wondered at me without hating me! Their lives throbbed with but one

hope: their union in love!... free or captive!... were it even in exile!... That royal youth with the limpid eyes, whose features recalled Sinjab to me! That chaste child, so loving, so beautiful!... Their souls, parted but not disunited, called to each other and knew themselves each the other's! Is it not thus that our race, through the ages, in our sublime India, conceives and feels the sentiment of love? Faithful, immortally!

"They, a danger, Siva? Why, Sedjnour, reared by sages, gave thanks to the Destinies for being relieved of the care of kings! He pitied me, smiling, for having wearied myself so passionately with it! A prince careless of glory, he thought frivolous those ideal laurels whose mere lustre makes me pale!... To love each other! That, for him as for his beloved Yelka, was the only kingdom! And they were quite sure, they said, that I would soon unite them, since I had been loved, and was faithful."

Akedysseril, after hiding her widow's face a moment in her radiant hands, went on:

"To answer those children by sending them executioners? No! Never. And yet what was I to resolve, since death alone can put an end, past recall, to the stubborn persist-

ence of a prince's partisans, and since India was demanding peace of me?... Already other rebellions threatened: I had once more to take up arms against Indo-Scythia... Suddenly a strange thought lit my mind! It was the eve of the day on which I was to march against the aborigines of the Arachosian mountains. It was of you alone, Siva, that I thought! Leaving my palace by night, I hastened here alone (remember, morose divinity!) and came to ask help, before your sanctuary, of your black pontiff.

"'Brahmin,' I said to him, 'I know that neither my throne, whose whiteness is lit by so many jewels, nor armies, nor the admiration of peoples, nor treasures, nor the power of this inviolate lotus, no, that nothing can equal in joy the first delights of Love, or its voluptuous tortures. If one could die of nuptial ravishment, my heart would have ceased to beat since the hour when, pale and radiant, Sinjab made me his captive beneath his kisses, for ever, as beneath chains!

"'And yet, if by some enchantment it were possible for these condemned children to die of a joy so keen, so piercing, so untasted until then, that such a death would seem to them more desirable than life? Yes, by one of

those magics that disperse us like shadows, if you could heighten their very love, exalt it by some virtue of Siva! into a blaze of desires… perhaps the fire of their first transports would suffice to consume the bonds of their senses in a swoon that knows no waking! Ah! if this celestial death could be brought about, would it not reconcile all, since they would bestow it upon themselves? It alone seemed to me worthy of their sweetness and their beauty.'

"It was to these words that that mouth of night, pledging your divine promise, made answer to me with tranquillity:

"'Queen, I will accomplish your desire.'

"On this assurance from your priest, free access to the palaces of my captives was granted him by my orders. Consoled beforehand by the beauty of my crime, I set out in arms at the next dawn for Arachosia, whence I return this evening, victorious once more, Siva! thanks to your shadow and to my warriors.

"Now, a little while ago, as I passed the citadels, I bethought me of the fatal marvel, accomplished, no doubt, during my absence. Already musing on sacred

offerings, I was contemplating the outside of this temple, when my phaodjs appeared and revealed to me what had been, towards me, the double-dealing of this very old man here."

The sovereign widow looked at the fakir: her voice scarcely betrayed, by slight tremblings, the fury she was mastering.

"Give me the lie!" she went on. "Tell us with what delights you chose to strew with flowers, for those ideal young lovers, the slope of the promised death? beneath the tears of what ecstasies you veiled their ravished eyes? in what unknown thrillings of love you set their senses vibrating, to that mortal languor in which I dreamed their two beings would expire? No! be silent.

"My phaodjs, listening within the walls, were watching you; and I have cause to value their faithful clear-sightedness... Come, you may lift your eyes to me! To him who casts at me the look that tames, I send back the look that crushes, being none of those who submit to enchantments.

"O pure prince, Sedjnour, artless shade, and you, pale Yelka, so gentle, O virgin! Children, children!... here he is,

this man of torments, whom we must arraign, there where you are, before the merciless divinities that have not loved.

“I wish to know why this son of a forgotten woman hid from me the hatred he bore, no doubt, to some sovereign of the race from which they sprang, and what vengeance he meant to wreak upon that innocent posterity!...

“For by what other motive can your work be explained, Brahmin? Unless your fierce native instincts, having in the long run crazed your barren old age, made you act unknowing... and, before the perfection of their double torment, how is one to believe it?

“So it was only with words, was it not? nothing but words, that you inflicted a mysterious agony upon their souls, until at last that voluntary death, in which you persuaded them to take refuge from their sufferings, came to deliver them... from having listened to you!

“Yes, I divine the whole of this subtle crime, priest; and it is out of disdain, know it, that I do not this very instant send your head to ring and bound upon these flagstones, profaned by your perjury.”

Akedysseril, who had just let her eyes flash, resumed in bitter accents:

“As soon as the austerity of your aspect had won the faith of those clear souls, you began this accursed work. And it was the simplicity of their mutual tenderness that you first set yourself to destroy. By the breath of what dark suggestions you withered the sap of love in those young stems, which, growing pale, began thenceforth to wilt for your delight, I am about to tell you!

“Old man, you needed each of them to feel alone! Well then, according to what you let them understand, was not each to outlive the forgotten one, and reign, thanks to my wishes, in distant lands, at the side of some royal being full of love, whom each already preferred?... How could you persuade them? Ah, but you knew how to offer a thousand proofs!... Kept apart, could those children exchange the one look that would have pierced the murky fumes of your vengeance like a ray of the sun? No! No. You triumphed; and presently, I tell you, I shall show you by what dread artifice! And the chaste fire in their veins, fanned without cease by the ravage of jealousies and by the melancholy of desertion, you knew how to inflame

into desires so frenzied as to become carnal, because of the belief in which you steeped their hearts: that neither could ever possess the other. Crossing the Ganges every day between their dwellings, you made yourself, upon the sacred waters, a kind of fearful messenger of tears, of terror, of deadly illusions and of farewells.

“Ah! the reports of my phaodjs go deep: they have enlightened me upon a certain detestable power at your command! They have sworn by the Devas of the Eternal Expiations that no weapon is to be feared beside the use to which your black genius can bend the speech of the living. Upon your tongue, they affirm, there cross at your pleasure lightnings more deceitful, more dazzling and more murderous than those which flash in battle from the feints of our scimitars. And when a baleful spirit waves its torch in the depths of your designs, this art, or rather this power, resolves itself first into…”

Here the queen, half closing her eyelids, seemed to follow with a gleam between her lashes, in the vague darkness of the temple, an invisible thread, lost and floating; and, as if to figure the analysis on which her thoughts were venturing, she smoothed with two of her slender

pale fingers the tip of one eyebrow, stretching her other hand towards the Brahmin:

“...into distant suppositions, subtly reasoned, and followed by dreadful silences... Then certain inflexions of your voice, most singular, awaken who knows what anguish, whose shadow you watch unceasingly as it passes over men’s brows. Then (mystery of all reason overcome!) strange consonances, yes, almost void of meaning, whose magic secrets are familiar to you, suffice you to graze our minds with elusive, freezing disquiets! with suspicions so troubled that an unknown anxiety soon weighs upon the very ones whose distrust, now awake, had begun to look you in the face. It is too late. The word of your lips then puts on the cold blue lustres of swords, of dragons’ scales, of precious stones. It enlaces, fascinates, rends, dazzles, envenoms, stifles... and it has wings! Its occult bites make love bleed past all healing. You know the art of rousing the supreme hopes, only to disappoint them for ever! You barely suppose... and you convince more than if you swore. If you feign to reassure, your menacing solicitude turns men pale. And at your will the deadly malice that quickens your hissing thought

never praises but to mask the oblique arrows of your reservations, which alone matter! You know it, for you are like a wicked dead man. With a squinting, cold scent you can measure your thrusts to the one who listens. And at last, when you are gone, you leave in the mind you meant thus to pierce with a fluid venom the germ of a corrosive sadness, which time aggravates, which sleep itself feeds, and which soon becomes so heavy, so acrid and so dark that life loses all savour, the brow bows down overwhelmed, the azure seems soiled since your look, the heart is wrung for ever, and simple beings may die of it. It was by the power of this murderous language, your privilege, Brahmin! that you took delight, and set yourself day after day, to crush, as between the bones of your hands, the twin chalice of those young and candid souls: O spectre stifling two roses in the night!

“And when their lips were dumb, their eyes fixed and tearless, their smiles quite gone out; when the weight of their anguish passed what their hearts could bear and still beat; when they had even ceased to curse me, and the sacred gods with me, you knew how to quicken suddenly in each of them that thirst to lose even the memory of

their being, to escape the torment of living without fidelity, without beliefs and without hope, a prey to the constant torture of their too insatiable desires for each other. And this night, this very night, you let them hurl themselves into the vast river, telling yourself, perhaps, that you would easily throw me off the scent of their death."

At these words there was a moment of great silence in the temple.

"Priest," Akedysseril went on again, "I held to my dream, which you engaged yourself, freely, to make real. You have been, here, the sacrilegious interpreter of your god, whose eternal integrity you have impaired by your treachery; for every perjury diminishes, by the measure of the promise betrayed, the very being of him who commits it or inspires it. I will know, therefore, why you have defied me, and for what motive this long outrage has not wearied your perseverance!... You shall answer me." She turned, like a long gleam of gold, towards the depths buried in darkness; and her voice, grown suddenly strident, woke as if by force, in bounding starts, the echoes of the immense halls about her: "And now, veiled fakirs, spectres that wander among the pillars of this dwelling,

who hide your cruel hands and appear at intervals, betrayed only by the swift shadow you cast upon the walls, hear the menacing voice of a woman who, servant until yesterday of those who understand the symbols and keep the word of the gods, speaks to you tonight as your sovereign; for her words are not vain: I have weighed their imprudence coldly, and it is not for me to tremble.

"If at this instant this taciturn ascetic, your master, evades my demand with vague answers, then within an hour, I swear it! I, Akedysseril! leading my maiden soldiery, we shall pass, standing at the front of our vermilion chariots, laughing, through the smoke, scattering the fire of our blazing torches into the depths of the black foliage of your ancient avenue! My mighty army, still drunk with triumph, which lies at the gates of Benares, will enter the city at my call. It will close round this building, henceforth forsaken by its god! And tonight, all night long, under the repeated shocks of my bronze rams, I will bring down its stones, its doors, its colonnades! I swear that it shall crumble at dawn, and that I will shatter the monstrous empty image in which, for centuries, the very spirit of Siva kept watch! My soldiery, whose number is ter-

rible, will with their heavy brazen maces have ground these rocky blocks pell-mell to powder before tomorrow's sun (if tomorrow dawns for us) has reached the height of heaven! And at evening, when the wind from the distant mountains, before which the other mountains of the earth humble themselves, has scattered all that vast cloud of idle dust across the plains, the valleys and the woods of Habad, I will come back, I! the avenger! with my warrior maidens, on our black elephants, to trample the ground where the old temple stood!... Crowned with fresh lotus and with roses, they and I, upon these ruins, will clash our golden cups together, crying to the stars, with songs of victory and of love, the names of two avenged shades! And this while my executioners send your heads and your souls, one after another, rolling from the top of whatever heaps may still remain of the wasted forecourts, into that Original Nothingness your hope imagines!... I have spoken."

Queen Akedysseril, her bosom heaving, her mouth trembling, lowering her lids over her great blue eyes all aflame, was silent. Then the Servant of Siva, turning

towards her his wan face of granite, answered her in a toneless voice:

"Young queen, considering the use we make of life, do you think to hold death over us as a threat? You sent us treasures, which our sains scattered disdainfully upon the steps of this temple, where no beggar in India dares come to pick them up! You speak of destroying this holy dwelling? A pretty pastime, and worthy of your destinies: to urge soldiers without a thought in their heads to pound vain stones into dust! The Spirit that animates and pervades these stones is the only temple they represent: revoke it, and the temple, in reality, is no more. You forget that it is this sacred Spirit alone that invests you yourself with the authority of which your arms are but the sensible prolongation... and that it would still be to it alone that you owed the power to abolish the veils under whose accident it is here embodied. When did sacrilege ever strike any other god... than the very being of him who was unhappy enough to commit its madness!

"You came to me thinking that the Wisdom of the Devas visits more especially those who, like us, by fasts, by bloody sacrifices and by prayers, keep the clear sight of

their own reason from depending upon the fumes of a drink, of a food, of a terror or of a desire. I welcomed your wishes because they were beautiful and dark, even in their feminine frivolity; and I engaged to fulfil them, out of deference to the blood that covers you. And now, at the very first steps of your return, your lucid mind relies upon the wits of informers, whom I have not even deigned to see, to judge, to accuse and to curse my work, rather than come simply to me, first of all, to learn of it.

“You see, your tongue has shaped in vain the sounds with which the echoes of this building are still vibrating; and if it pleased me to hear to the end your harmonious and already forgotten insults, it is because the anger of young slayers whose eyes are full of glory, of fires and of dreams, be it without ground and without cause, is always pleasing to Siva.

“Thus, Queen Akedysseril, you desire, and know not what it is that fulfils! You look at an end, and give no thought to the only means of reaching it. You asked whether it lay in the power of the Holy Science to bring two beings into that impassioned state of the senses in which some sudden violence of Love should destroy in

them, in the flash of one same instant, the forces of life?... Truly, what other enchantments than a reflection wholly natural was I to set to work, in order to satisfy the fancy of such a design? Listen, and deign to remember.

“When you gave the flower of yourself to the young husband, when Sinjab gathered you in his radiant embraces, never, you cried, had any virgin thrilled with more ardent delights; and your amazement, as you yourself avowed to me, was to have survived that grave rapture.

“That is because, remember, you were already favoured with a sceptre, your mind troubled with ambitious dreams, your soul scattered among a thousand cares for the future, and it was no longer in your power to give yourself wholly. Each of these things kept back, deep in your memory, a little of your being; and, belonging no longer entirely to yourself, you were taking yourself back, obscurely and in spite of yourself, even amid the conjugal charm of the embrace, to the attractions of those things that are strangers to Love.

“Why, then, be astonished, Akedysseril, at surviving a peril you never ran?

“You knew besides, from the brim of that cup in which the intoxication of the heavens ferments, forerunning perfumes of kisses, whose ideal had grazed your lips and blunted the divine sensation to come. Consider your widowhood, O fair widow of love, who know how to survive your grief so absently! How should the possession of a being have killed you, when his very loss sees you still alive?

“The truth is, young woman, that your nuptial night was only starlit. Its sparkling pallor was all like that of a thousand blue twilights gathered in the firmament, and scarcely veiling one another. The lightning of Kamadeva, the Lord of love, crossed it only with a pallor a little more luminous, and fleeting! And it is not in such gentle nights that human hearts can bear the shock of his mighty thunderbolt.

“No!... It is only in nights of despair, black and desolate, whose very air bids one die, when no regret for things lost and no desire for things dreamed throbs any longer in the being, save love alone; it is only in nights of that kind that so red a lightning can flash, furrow the expanse and annihilate those it strikes! It is in that void alone that

Love can at last freely pierce hearts and senses and thoughts, so far as to dissolve them into itself with one single and mortal shock! For a law of the gods has willed that the intensity of a joy be measured by the greatness of the despair endured for it: then only does that joy, seizing the whole soul at once, set it on fire, consume it, and set it free.

“That is why I gathered a great deal of night into the being of these two children: I made it even deeper and more desolate than the phaodjs could tell!... And now, queen, as to the enchantments at the command of the ancient Brahmins, do you suppose that your so clear-sighted spies know, for example, the inside of those great rocks from whose summit your young condemned ones chose, last night, to cast themselves into the Ganges?”

Here Akedysseril, tearing from its sheath her scimitar, which prolonged the gleam of her eyes, cried out, mastering her anger no longer:

“Senseless barbarian! While you utter all these vain sentences that killed my dear victims, ah! the river is rolling their innocent bodies under the stars, among the

reeds!... Very well: Nirvana calls you. Be annihilated, then!”

Her weapon traced a sweep of flame in the darkness. An instant more, and the ascetic, cut through the loins by the stroke of that strong young arm, was no more.

Suddenly she flung her weapon far from her, and the ringing clangour of its fall made the shadows of the temple start once more.

For, without even lifting his eyelids towards his accuser, the sombre pontiff had murmured, without disdain, without terror and without pride, this single word:

“Look.”

At that word the folds of the great veil of the altar of Siva had parted, laying open the interior of the cavern over which the god loomed.

Two ascetics, their eyelids lowered according to the sacerdotal rites, held back the vast blood-red folds at either side of the sanctuary.

At the far end of that place of horror the tripods were lit, as at the hour of a sacrifice. The Spirit of Siva being opposed, in the symbols, to the free upward rising of their flames, those great flames, beaten back by the curves of

tall plates of gold, cast an uneasy light upon the Stone of the victims. At the head of the Stone stood two sains, motionless, with downcast eyes, their torches held high.

And there, upon that marble bed, lay outstretched, pale with the paleness of the sky, two charming young beings. The snowy folds of their transparent bridal tunics revealed the sacred lines of their bodies; the light of their smile announced in them the rising of a dawn that had broken in the invisible, vermeil spaces of the soul; and that secret daybreak transfigured their stillness into an eternal ecstasy.

Surely some transport of supernatural felicity, passing the powers of sensation that the gods have meted out to men, must have delivered them from living, for the lightning of Death had fixed its expressive reflection upon their faces! Yes, both bore the imprint of the ideal joy whose suddenness had struck them down.

And there, upon the couch where the Brahmins of Siva had laid them, they kept still the attitude in which Death, whom surely they had never noticed, had come upon them, brushing their beings with its shadow. They had swooned away, lost in it, unwontedly, letting the

duality of their fused essences sink into that one instant of a love such as no other living pair will ever have known.

And these two mystic statues thus embodied the dream of a voluptuousness accessible only to immortal hearts.

The youthful beauty of Sedjnour, in its radiant whiteness, seemed to defy the darkness. He held, bent within his arms, the being of his being, the soul of his desire; and she, her white head thrown back upon the curve of an arm cast about the neck of her beloved, seemed asleep in a wild rapture. The august hand of Yelka had fallen upon the brow of Sedjnour; her beautiful hair, of a deepening brown, unrolled its black waves over her and over him; and her lips, parted towards his, offered him in a first kiss the candour of her last sigh. She had wished, doubtless, to draw with a gentle effort her lover's mouth to the flower of her lips, making him breathe at the same time the subtle and dear perfume of her virginal bosom, which she was still pressing against that adored breast!... And it was at the very moment when all the faintings, all the farewells, all the tortures of the soul were scarcely yet

effaced beneath the mutual transport of their sudden union!...

Yes, the resurrection, too suddenly delicious, of so many unhoped-for and pure intoxications, the rebound of that enchanted outpouring, the inward shock of that lightning kiss, which both had believed for ever unattainable, had borne them away with a single beat of the wing out of this life into the heaven of their own dream. And surely the torture, for them, would have been to survive that matchless instant!

Akedysseril contemplated in silence the marvellous work of the High Priest of Siva.

“Do you think, if the Devas gave you the power to awaken them, that these delivered ones would deign to accept Life again?” said the impenetrable fakir, in a tone whose austere irony was triumphant. “See, queen: now you envy them!”

She did not answer: a sublime emotion veiled her eyes. Clasping her hands upon one shoulder, she was admiring the fulfilment of her unheard-of dream.

Suddenly an immense murmur, the roaring swell of a multitude, and long clashings of arms, breaking in upon

her contemplation, made themselves heard outside the temple, whose doors rolled heavily back upon the flag-stones within.

On the threshold, not daring to enter when they saw the queen of Benares, still lit at the far end of the temple by the flames of the sanctuary, and turned away from them, stood the three viziers, bowing, watching her, weapons in hand, with a murderous air.

Behind them the warrior maidens showed their young heads of menacing Apsaras, their eyes kindled by anxiety as to what had become of their mistress: they could scarcely restrain themselves from invading the dwelling of the god.

Around them, far off, the army, in the night.

Then all that recall to life, and the melancholy of her power, and the duty of forgetting the beauty of dreams! and even the farewells of lost love: all the slavery, in fine, of Glory, swelled the bosom of Akedysseril with a deep sigh; and the first two tears of her life, and the last also! shone like drops of dew upon the lilies of her divine cheeks.

But soon it was as though a god had passed! Drawing up her tall form upon the topmost step of the altar:

“Viceroys, viziers and sowars of Habad,” she cried, in that voice known in the fray, which all the colonnades of the sombre building echoed, “you decreed the death of a prince, heir to the throne of Seur since the death of Sin-jab, my royal husband; you condemned to perish Sedjn-our, and also his betrothed, Yelka, princess of that rich region, at last subdued by our arms! Here they are!

“Recite the prayer for the generous shades who, in the abyss of the Spirit, strive towards the divine Swarga! Sing for them, warrior maidens, and you, O dear warriors! the hymn of the Yajur-Veda, the word of Happiness! May India, under my reign, appeased at last, alas, at this price, flower again in the image of its lotus, the eternal Flower! … But let the hearts of those whose souls are grave be wrung as well: for a greatness of Asia has vanished upon this stone!… The sublime race of Ebbahar is extinct.”

THE END

Marko Prekić Kentera is a Belgrade-born poet and literature enthusiast dedicated to making rare and forgotten public domain works accessible through translation, with a focus on the French Symbolist movement. He uses collaborative AI-assisted methods to create these translations, which he shares freely for other readers to discover and enjoy. Other translations include works by and about Stéphane Mallarmé, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Édouard Dujardin, Charles Morice, Octave Mirbeau, Stuart Merrill, René Ghil, Émile Hennequin, Gustave Kahn, Ernest Raynaud and others. These translations are freely available at leonhenniquenovel.com, together with his original poetry and his translations of poetry into Serbian.